

Culture and Country: The Role of the Arts and Heritage in the Nationalist Revival in Newfoundland

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Culture and Country: The Role of the Arts and Heritage in the Nationalist Revival in Newfoundland¹

SHANE O'DEA

WHEN INTERVIEWED on CBC Radio (29 March 2003) during the Newfoundland Historical Society's symposium on "The Idea of Newfoundland: nationalism, identity and culture," the novelist Ed Riche made the point that nationalism is the toy of a St. John's elite. For a man much given to sharp observation, that comes perilously close to a self-evident statement: nationalism is a leisure-time occupation so, ergo, it has to be the pursuit of an elite. It is not like skidooring or curling or bowling. It requires time and patience to read — or hear — involved papers, intense conversations, savage indignations. Leisure without pleasure. So too culture. Unless it has been certified by scholars and journalists — surely an elite — it has no existence. The dance of the Green Bay Sugarplum Fairy is only the footshuffling of outharbour youth until a Folklore graduate thesis discerns its ancient roots and its theoretical value. So, as this journal's editor has pointed out, we have the paradoxical situation of Newfoundland nationalism being generally perceived as a "townie" (i.e., St. John's) phenomenon which is based on the outport.

I should make clear that my credentials for speaking on this topic are dubious at best. Though I once was written into a Newfoundland passport and held a Newfoundland identity card, and though my parents took one of the last convoys out of England in 1945 so that I might be a Newfoundlander born, I can only claim a very distant connection with the fishery or with the bay. I am a townie, born of farmers, carters, shopkeepers and merchants and, narrower again, an Eastender, one of those St. John's men whom the artist David Blackwood said were "always a misfit in Newfoundland, temporary, transient, exploitive." Unable to vote in the 1948 referendums because I was out of the country — and may have been considered under-

age — I was fed on the venom of the time by my great aunt, a vigorous Westender. My attitudes took a cultural twist when I became a collector of Newfoundland stamps, and resented the fact that Confederation had deprived me of the opportunity to develop that collection. As I entered my teenage years I saw in Fidel Castro a model for what we might do to recover our country: my surviving school notebooks are full of plans for a Newfoundland Liberation Movement. I still have my British Army guide to street fighting, and used to visualize myself — and comrades — holed up in the General Post Office fighting the Canadian forces of occupation. These insurrectionary tendencies of mine — I firmly believe — are why Joe Smallwood had the building torn down in 1958.

So let us look at this connection between culture and country, and here I am using the word “country” as synonymous with “nation” and referring to Newfoundland. As a country cannot be built without a culture, a culture needs a country. The latter may seem obvious — a culture cannot exist in a vacuum. However, a culture can exist without a definite geography, without a delimiting border. There are ethnic groups that are not fixed in a single place that have the commonly held set of customs, creations and practices that define a group of people, for example the various diaspora groups (Jews, Irish, Newfoundlanders). But I mean something different: I mean that the culture of place cannot begin to exist until that place has begun to achieve a sense of identity; that is, until the people of that place have begun to observe that what they do in work, life or leisure has features common to them, but different from, among other things, those of the place they came from.

The Newfoundland sense of identity began as a work definition — the Newfoundland men, the migratory fishers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the 1840s there was an assertion of nativism, a distinction between the bush-born and the Old Country people, which became submerged in a more general and inclusive sense of belonging and identity by the end of that century. This was expressed, for instance, both by D.W. Prowse, a Protestant historian of English lineage, and M.F. Howley, a Roman Catholic archbishop and man of letters of Irish extraction. Both were native-born, both supporters of the *Newfoundland Quarterly* and of our oldest heritage organization, the Newfoundland Historical Society. The country acquired an anthem and a flag (albeit unofficial), and then surrendered a generation of young men to the Great War. Deprived of their potential contribution and required to pay for what we had lost — to pay our war debts after we had paid with the blood of a generation — we became a quasi-dominion. For our children and for children yet to come we got two rewards: a seat in the House of Lords for that clever politician Edward Morris, and a temporary seat at the imperial head table for ourselves. But that seat never translated into a place in the League of Nations, and the table soon became bare as Newfoundland began to fail in the late 1920s when the corruption of the Squires government met the collapse of the stock markets. In the early thirties, technically bankrupt yet not allowed to default, our seat was repossessed under Commission of Government, and we exchanged it all

for a chrome chair when we confederated with Canada in 1949. We had moved from gestation to abdication to the annihilation of the nation in less than a century.

Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as more people came to be permanent inhabitants and, more importantly, descendants of permanent inhabitants, the sense of person-linked-to-place which is the essential for nationalism, grew into being. As I have said to an earlier symposium (O'Dea 2001), the later nineteenth century was particularly crucial here, since it was then that the wealthiest inhabitants became permanent inhabitants, or, to put it differently, inhabitants who became wealthy no longer felt the compunction to emigrate, to return "home" (as England, with increasing irony, was called well into the last century) where they could display their new-found wealth in a society which would validate it as achievement. This point at which the makers of capital begin to stay in Newfoundland marks another significant stage in the development of the identity and culture because it confers on the place a class and income-based approval.

The development of any culture involves persistence, recognition, validation and resistance. Common traits have to persist and develop over time and then reach a point where they are recognized as characteristic of the group. At that point validation or denigration may take place: the traits may be taken up by a number in the group, seen as positive and worn with pride — validation; they may be seen by others within or without as negative — denigration. It is at this point that — if resistance occurs — the culture begins to be shaped.

Let us then begin this examination at the chrome chair — the quintessential sign of cultural change during the revival of the 1970s. The chrome chair represented modernity, efficiency and cleanliness to the post-Confederation household. In Mary Walsh's view, the generation that came of age in the 1950s had not fought for Confederation or against it and were beneficiaries of an era of prosperity. Uninvolved in the past, uncertain of the future, many of them felt ashamed of being Newfoundlanders, hid their accents, denied their ethnicity and slunk down Yonge Street in assimilative slime (Walsh 2003). Hear this analysis from 1952:

Among Newfoundland's favourite myths is the belief that we have in this Province a very distinctive and flavourful culture which should be preserved at all costs. Even the Government subscribes to the belief, offering annual prizes for the encouragement of arts and letters.

We have no quarrel with the prizes, provided it is realized that we are trying to interest people in laying the foundations for a cultural tradition rather than building upon a tradition which already exists. The truth is that Newfoundland has no literature, no music, no art, little philosophy and less science. The only culture we have is that of the fish flake, though even that isn't our own, having come with our peasant ancestors from England and the Channel Islands....

Perhaps four hundred years of drudgery and barter have not been conducive to the flight of the imagination. There is something incurably prosaic about trading in fish, and the stages and the stores, while they may look quaint and picturesque ... take on

quite a different aspect to those who remember nights spent in them by the light of a kerosene oil lamp, ankle deep in blood and guts.... (Horwood 1952)

This piece is emblematic of the attitude of the time and — looked at from the perspective of what was commonly thought of as culture — not far wrong. But it was also a very narrow perspective if one notes that the writer, Harold Horwood, failed to consider the poetry of E.J. Pratt or the novels of Margaret Duley. And there were other local poets and prose writers trying to make their way all through the forties and fifties. Horwood reflects a sense of our indefensible smallness in the great Confederation scheme. We get fleeced by Valdmanis and others, Joe Smallwood's dreams turn sour, and we become, in the phrase of the time and the view of the national press, a "banana republic" with a queer little motor-mouthed clown for a premier. That is the denigration.

Horwood is an anomalous figure here for he might have been the logical leader of the cultural revolution. Novelist, poet, journalist, politician, he wrote the first major post-Confederation novel, *Tomorrow Will be Sunday* (1966); he fostered the development of young poets; he was, in his own words "a hippie before the first hippie was hatched" (Horwood 1992). But he had several marks against him: as a Confederate he had participated in the annihilation of the nation but his role was worse than that: he had, as he phrased it, helped "con Newfoundlanders into confederation." He also sees himself as having a central role in the banning of the iconic seal hunt; that the campaign was "initiated in Newfoundland" by one of his articles not "by Canadian mainlanders such as Brian Davies" — again his own words. And, finally, one piece which he fails to mention in this autobiography but which served to paint us, or at least our ancestors, as genocidal savages: his 1959 *Maclean's* article, "The People who were murdered for fun" about the extinction of the Beothuk (Horwood 1959). He is also the author of the piece quoted earlier about Newfoundland culture. If Confederation needed a local *collaborateur*, it had one in Horwood who fed, nay grossly embellished, negative notions about Newfoundland, and fed himself from them.

The critical change came with the discovery of the outport and all it represented as the alternative to the chrome set. This discovery occurred just as the outport seemed to be under great threat, since one of the logical conclusions of post-Confederation modernization and development was centralization and resettlement. This led in turn to the beginning of the resistance. Ted Russell's *Uncle Mose* tales (1954-60) and his plays, most significantly *The Holdin' Ground* (1954), are important here. Russell took the "culture of the fish flake" and gave it life, gave it recognition, for a broad audience of Newfoundlanders. The dramatic strength of *The Holdin' Ground* served to validate the outport — it had become worthy of presentation in an art form.

The next stage occurred when the outport was validated on the national stage in prose and photograph — by Farley Mowat and John de Visser in *The Rock*

Within the Sea (1968), an extraordinarily powerful lament for a land that would soon be lost. Both writers romanticized the outport life and its past and we, in the lofty realism of the present, deplore that as nostalgia, sentimental cant. It is, but it is often essential if an attitudinal change is to be effected. It is part of the mythologizing of the nation.

But this denigration was countered by a slow recognition of what we were, had been, had done, had created, had lost. And here is where, ironically but without irony, I have to raise a glass to Joe Smallwood who saw his nationalism in a different way than I do; who never failed to trumpet Newfoundland's exceptionality to the world; whose first act as premier was to charter Memorial University and to build it up throughout his reign, only to have its graduates, in their new-found confidence, turn on him and put him out in 1971. If recognition is an essential of a national culture then Smallwood, in the creation of the university, set the basis for that recognition. But the role of the academy — of the Institute of Social and Economic Research, of History and Folklore and, centrally, of G.M. Story — in the culture is another topic for another day.

If in Ted Russell we began to create a mythology of place, then in Cassie Brown and David Blackwood we began to create a mythology of person. David Blackwood's "Lost Party Series" graves on the memory vast muffled figures, moulded by wind, fixed like snow and rock against low-lit seascapes. Evoking the names of the sealing captains great and small — Kean, Winsor, Blackwood, Barbour — the boats, the churches, the customs, the crises, he has etched in copper Newfoundland's sea saga. And his motives were unrepentantly nationalistic. He saw the hunt as what "might well be the only Canadian mythology existing outside our native cultures" (Murray 1978, 6). His concerns, like Mowat's and like Horwood's, were essentially anti-modern and he believed that "the quality of life ... community life, industry, spirit, independence, self-reliance and self-confidence ... are things Newfoundlanders had in great abundance prior to joining Canada in 1949 ... they were almost a separate race of people" (Murray 1978, 8). Peter Bell said of this work, "Sometimes I get the feeling the whole seal hunt was his invention! ... The seal hunt will go, but its challenge and the fortitude of those who engaged in it will survive, honoured in memory largely through a dozen or so etchings by David Blackwood" (Bell 1979, 4). This culture was celebrated in prose by Cassie Brown, whose *Death on the Ice* (1972) is a powerful and moving account of the 1914 S.S. *Newfoundland* sealing disaster. The irony is that she was Harold Horwood's cousin. It was a best-seller but, more than that, it gave a late-twentieth-century audience a sense of the seal hunt and an intense appreciation for the work lives of their forebears. With its villains and its heroes, its dramatic situations and tragic tableaux, the book made myth of a hunt that was already under pressure. The work of Brown and Blackwood is now a fixed part of the cultural apparatus of most of us. There can be few Newfoundlanders who have not read her work, few who cannot recognize his.

If there is in the development of a national culture a mythologizing of the past, there has also to be a realization of the present. That we see in Christopher Pratt, whose exact lines and muted colours pay little heed to romantic notions of landscape or person, and yet capture aspects of our place. The same is true of Percy Janes's raw rendering of the Stone family in *House of Hate* (1970). Much more stylistically adventuresome than *Tomorrow will be Sunday*, it shattered any notions of the rustic idyll that we might have been attempting to cultivate. The plays of Irish-born Michael Cook, notably *The Head, Guts, and Soundbone Dance* (1973), had a similar effect on stage. From a good deal less grim, wryer perspective, the *Evening Telegram* columns of the satirist Ray Guy, his examinations of what he called "juvenile outharbour delights," give a sense of bay life with the sentiment excoriated. Guy's play, *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With* (1985), is a darker portrait of outpost life and is similar in that way to Cook's work. With these works we are back to the blood and guts of the fish stage and the milltown, but now they were the subject of art, not the object of denigration. They represented a cultural maturation in the artists who are sufficiently confident of their country to take chances with presenting her darker side. That was not, of course, the same with their audiences who were often much offended by these unpleasant portraits.

It is in the theater that we get much closer to the active rendering of culture into nationalism, and I want to talk in particular of CODCO and the Mummers Troupe. CODCO detonated an extraordinary theatrical explosion when it brought "Cod on a Stick" to the Arts and Culture Centre in 1974. With a brilliant combination of mime, music and movement, tied to the sharpest script I had ever heard, they gored every one of our sacred cows. Their contribution was to deflate the notion of the stunned Newfoundlander, to validate our wit and to terrify the condescending mainlander. Mary Walsh says they were probably all nationalists, but not secessionists (Walsh 2003). Rather, they resented the raw deal Newfoundland got in 1949 and wanted, by their work, to foster a better sense of self in the Newfoundland people. That they stand now, with *22 Minutes*, as the swiftest minds in Canada is testimony to their achievement.

The Mummers Troupe had very different goals but a similar commitment to the country. Chris Brookes says their involvement was 80 percent nationalist, 20 percent art (Brookes 2003). He saw his work as reviving an indigenous theater form so it was — arguably — nostalgic, but what he did with it was not. The troupe's collective productions which include *Gros Mourn* (1973), *Buchans a Mining Town* (1974), *East End Story* (1975), *They Club Seals Don't They?* (1978) were all intended to be agents of change. This was art presenting reality, and hoping to motivate change in that reality. It deliberately took theater to the people and from the people, dealing with their issues and their aspirations. So, more than being a local scene by a local artist in a local venue, it was to effect local action by generating local commitment to the concerns covered.

It was with the LSPU Hall that art and heritage combined to advance the nationalist agenda. When it was taken over by both the Mummers and Community Planning Association in 1976,² the hall was a building in trouble, since the longshoremen had declined from their glory days as one of the largest unions in Newfoundland. The downtown was also in trouble. The City Council was hell-bent on turning it into a high-rise shopping mall intersected by highways, ignoring a dangerously decaying residential area of architectural merit and an almost moribund retail area. With the Newfoundland Historic Trust fostering a concern for the architecture of the buildings and the Community Planning Association fostering their reuse and rehabilitation, a groundswell of public interest was created in what most citizens had written off as irretrievable. The Trust came to this project with the same goals as the nationalist artists: to recognize what had persisted and to resist its loss. Like the Mummers, the Trust had a social, not just an aesthetic agenda. It wanted to preserve all forms of architecture — not just the monumental; it wanted to encourage townscape preservation — not just individual buildings; it wanted to encourage the use of historic buildings for low-income housing — not gentrification. These were the principles that governed the Trust's support of the St. John's Heritage Conservation Area.

But what led up to this? The story begins in the 1950s and 60s when a number of significant buildings were torn down as part of the modernization of St. John's. The demolition of the 1813 lighthouse at Fort Amherst in 1954, the General Post Office in 1958, the great renaissance-revival Gazette Building in 1959/60, and the small stone-built St. Mary's Church in 1961 outraged local antiquarians and citizens. To a certain degree this may have been the response of nationalist St. John's to the changes wrought by Confederation (particularly in the cases of federal government demolitions). Until 1966, the Newfoundland Historical Society was essentially the only body to address these matters. But little was done because the society was unprepared to contest the right of governments, institutions and private interests to dispose of their own property. And, certainly, Newfoundland's historical consciousness had not reached the state where it was prepared to actively pursue building preservation. When, during Commission of Government, the fortifications at Signal Hill were being plundered for building stone, a member requested the Society to take steps to preserve them (NHS 1936, 1938). When Fort Amherst's future was threatened in 1951, representations were made to the federal government and through the press (*Evening Telegram* 1951). But, except for expressions of concern in its minutes, expressions of impotent and private regret, and occasional representations in public, there was little the Society could do. However, when the Garland house in Trinity was being torn down in 1966, there was a deepening concern that we were disposing of both our history and our culture. Despite the valiant efforts of one Trinitarian, of the Newfoundland Historical Society and representations to government both federal and provincial, despite the premier's

own commitment to the Newfoundland past, nothing was done and the house was reduced to a pair of gables.

Until the foundation of the Newfoundland Historic Trust in 1966 there was no public body to take action — as opposed to express concern — on the preservation of buildings. The Trust came into being to save Christchurch, a major element in the cultural landscape of Quidi Vidi. However, while the members of the Trust recognized that if the church went the heritage character of the village would be lost, their perception of conservation was, at that time, directed toward the notion of individual buildings, not toward area conservation. Such a concept only slowly emerged as the Trust developed (NHT 1969, 1971). As a consequence its next two causes also involved individual structures, the Commissariat House of 1819 and Powerscourt of 1806. But as the concern for the cultural landscape of buildings developed so too did a linkage between conservation and social concerns: in 1973 the Trust proposed that Powerscourt be developed as low-cost housing units (NHT 1973).

In that period, those twenty years from 1970 to 1990, the arts and heritage were driven by a sense of national identity and, in their turn, shaped it. Like the wealthy of the nineteenth century, our artists and preservationists became permanent inhabitants. Many who had emigrated came home and drew in new people in their path, who too became permanent and helped create the country. They came because of a past and a place, they stayed because the present promised a future.

What of the present? The arts and heritage have become major players in the economy. Their value has been recognized, they have been validated as economic, not merely cultural, contributors and not parasites as they were formerly viewed; they are showcase items. But more importantly, they have played a major role in reinforcing the social fabric by building a pride in place that was not there before. With this has come an interesting change in fiction. As Jerry Bannister noted last night, the past has become the subject matter of novels. Bernice Morgan in *Random Passage* (1992) took us back so viscerally to the early nineteenth century, creating what strikes one who has read the pages of missionary reports as absolutely true. Michael Crummey and Kevin Major (for different audiences) work in a similar vein. Wayne Johnston plays with history. For him it is a bell to be sounded, a cave to be probed, a starting point, not a goal. But look at Ed Riche, Michael Winter and Lisa Moore: they write entirely in the present, often about downtown St. John's, sometimes about themselves.³ They represent another maturation of the culture; the capacity to write of the present. There is no need to validate the past or escape to it; the outport is no longer the required setting; they write of themselves, and their lives are interesting enough for the critical reader. When the culture can speak of its own time and place and self, it has attained a confidence that is the future. Consider this then: the past is a theme in our culture, not a direction for it.

Notes

¹This paper has benefited from the advice of this journal's current editor, and of the founding editor, Patrick O'Flaherty.

²The LSPU (Longshoremen's Protective Union) Hall on Victoria Street is in the heart of the old downtown. The Community Planning Association of Canada's (CPAC) Newfoundland branch had long been concerned about proper civic planning but had a non-confrontational (some would argue supine) relationship with the City Council, and never spoke with vigour on the major urban issues of the early 1970s. A group of urban activists engineered a coup and took over the organization. They saw a small cultural venue as important to downtown revival, and worked with national agencies to develop the first of the city's Neighbourhood Improvement Programs.

³Winter has now turned to history in *The Big Why* (2004), which deals with Rockwell Kent's life in Brigus.

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